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## Grace Episcopal students bow low in Navajo Nation

BY THERESA STEINMEYER

**T**wenty-five students from the Grace Episcopal Church Youth Missions Organization will travel to Bluff, Utah, on a journey of good works and spiritual transformation this month.

They've come together from Hinsdale, Clarendon Hills, Western Springs, La Grange and Burr Ridge, and led by Grace Episcopal's Rev. Chris Pierce, they're excited to build a "hogan" (a sacred Navajo dwelling) for Catherine Plummer, wife of the first Navajo bishop at St. Christopher's Mission at Navajo Nation's Episcopal Church. Plummer currently lives in a condemned trailer, and the hogan will serve as her new home.

Traditionally, a hogan is an eight-sided structure built around a central fireplace with dirt floors and mud walls. To create more livable space for Plummer, Hinsdale-area architect Bruce George has drawn up a modernized design, which includes two additional rooms built onto one side of the building, raised floors and a steel roof.

But to Rev. Pierce, the trip is not so much about philanthropy as it is about fostering cultural acceptance and respect for the Navajo faith among students.

He brought the students on a similar trip last year to build a hogan in Crown Point, N.M. But on that trip, Rev. Pierce outsourced much of the planning. He worked with an organization through which he encountered what he referred to as a "radical, fundamentalist theology"—a theology that tried to impose a Eurocentric understanding of faith on the Navajo people in the process of helping them.

"Although we did great work last year, and I began to get an exposure to the Navajo people, I was very uncomfortable,

because I was able to recognize that the relationship was predicated on saying 'yes' to what the white man had to say," Rev. Pierce said. "This isn't just a church taking a mission trip to go help poverty because Jesus said so.

"To take care of those that are in need is a mandate; it's not a mission.

"Our very human existence calls us to take care of those who suffer."

Building the hogan is only the beginning of the students' purpose: they are traveling to Utah as empty-handed guests who want to understand and respect the Navajo spirituality without trying to impose their own religious biases upon it.

Rev. Pierce said that it's not necessary for the Navajo people to speak about Jesus—the Navajo faith, grounded in the sacredness of the earth, is every bit as beautiful and true.

"Our respect for the earth has not anywhere reached the level and depth that they have," he said. "They understand the winds and the spirit in the winds.

"They understand the gifts of the earth; they honor it."

To ensure that this year's trip would be rooted in open-mindedness, Rev. Pierce traveled to Navajo Nation himself last fall to build stronger relationships with the Navajo people and their faith. He explored the nation's Episcopal diocese to learn about the people's needs, but when he arrived at St. Christopher's, he felt that the universe was speaking to him.

"The wind said, 'This is where we're to be,'" he said.

This year, instead of outsourcing the trip's intensive logistical preparations, Rev. Pierce has taken them upon himself. He has organized meal plans, construction materials and the necessary

trip leadership, which includes adults from Grace Episcopal Church, contractors, an electrician, plumber, medical assistance, two chefs and a cultural liaison.

The students have also been preparing. At the Grace Episcopal "Rock-a-thon" in April, they rocked in their chairs for 24 hours to fundraise for the trip. Since all but three went on the New Mexico trip last summer, most of the group has been meeting weekly for nearly two years to share meals and meditate.

Their journey will begin before dawn on June 7, when they'll load their bus for the 21-hour trip. Contractors will set the foundation in advance to give it time to cure, and when the students arrive, they will assign and teach the students the necessary building skills. The students will work in four teams, and may be assigned daily tasks like framing, roofing, or kitchen and cleaning duties.

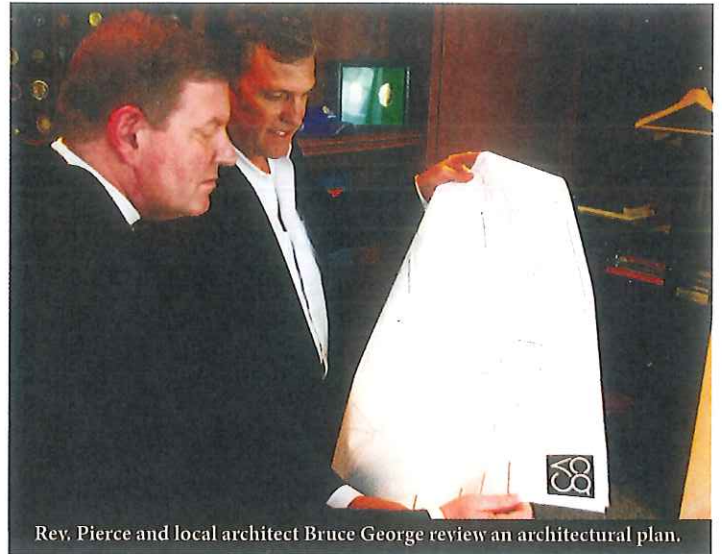
"Most of the time, a team gets into their project, they won't give it up," Rev. Pierce said.

Assuming poor weather conditions or inspections don't slow them down, they'll have put a roof on the hogan by the end of their five-day construction period.

Still, Rev. Pierce estimated that two to three days of work will remain when it is time for the students to return home—work that includes dry-walling, mudding, painting and possibly adding windows and doors. The Grace Episcopal group will be leaving the hogan unfinished, and although Rev. Pierce said that the help of an outside group will be necessary to complete it, he has no idea who will come. Nevertheless, he has "complete faith" that someone will hear the call to finish the job.

"The winds don't just speak to me," he said.

Rev. Pierce said he looks forward to taking the students for silent meditation in the mountains, to the place where the winds



first "spoke" to him.

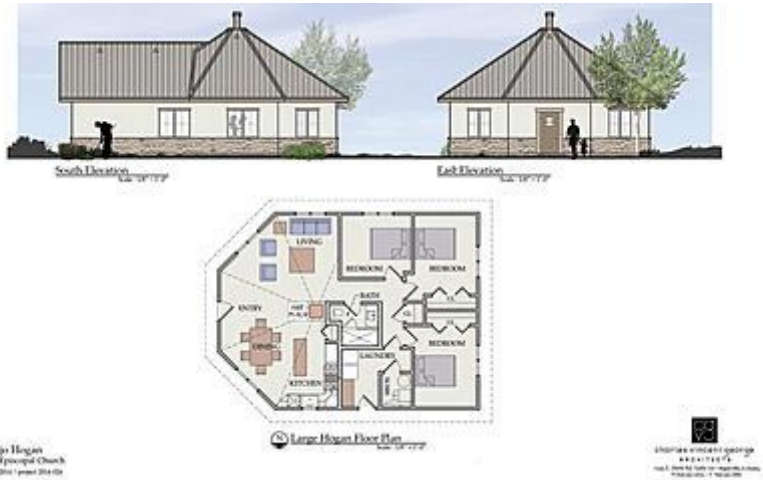
He'll bring along a flautist, an Apache shaman and a medicine man, and the students will take part in a "smudging," an American Indian blessing with smoke. Together, they'll try to center themselves, and to be open to what Rev. Pierce believes will be a greater understanding of the universe than the students have ever known.

"The universe has spoken that this is where we're to be," Rev. Pierce said, "and to be not because they need us, but because we need them; because they're going to show us how to bow, and we're going to bow low."

# Hinsdale church members building traditional Navajo hogan



A Hinsdale architect, Bruce George and members of the Grace Episcopal Church are volunteering to build a new home for a Navajo woman who serves as their bishop.



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**By Annemarie Mannion, Tribune reporter**

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A rusted, leaky 37-year-old trailer with no running water is hardly a place to call home.

At the age of 65, Catherine Plummer, is looking forward to leaving the decrepit trailer where she's lived since 1977 on a Navajo reservation in Utah. She will move into a new home designed by a Hinsdale resident in the traditional style of a Navajo hogan and built by volunteers from a suburban church.

Grace Episcopal Church of Hinsdale is behind the effort to provide a new home for Plummer, who is Navajo and an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. Her husband, Steven, who passed away in 2005, was the first Navajo bishop in the Episcopal church.

Plummer's new home will have eight sides, doors facing the east so inhabitants can greet the rising sun and a fireplace in the center. The three-bedroom home will be made of stone and stucco and have a galvanized metal roof to reflect the sun.

The 1,200-square-foot building and an adjacent guest house were designed by Bruce George, a church member and president of Charles Vincent George Architects in Naperville. It will be used as living space and for worship.

A group of 25 young people from the Hinsdale church plan to be in Utah from June 7 to June 15 to build the hogan.

Chris Pierce, rector at Grace Episcopal, said Plummer's current living conditions "are deplorable. It's a broken-down trailer. It's been condemned."

Plummer raised her two children in the trailer. Her adult son is suffering from lymphoma, the same disease that killed his father, and will live with her.

Describing the trailer, Plummer, too, said it has become unsafe.

"The floor is giving out in the master bedroom and in the dining room, the roof is caving in," she said.

Pierce said rundown housing is not an unusual sight in the Navajo Nation that covers 27,000 square miles, is larger than 10 states, and extends into Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. The nation, which is known as the Navajo Land Area Mission Jurisdiction by the Episcopalian church, has a population of about 180,000.

Pierce started visiting the reservation two years ago to do service at St. Christopher's Mission, which was established by the Episcopal church in 1943 in Bluff, Utah. The church also has missions in Arizona and New Mexico.

Pierce said the reservation has unemployment of over 50 percent, rampant poverty and many dwellings that are ramshackle and do not have running water or electricity.

"To see it is remarkable," he said. "You say to yourself 'How can this be? Why haven't we done a better job of helping them?'"

George said the opportunity to design the structure prompted him to become acquainted with what the Navajo hold as sacred.

"I had a lot of help from the people in Navajo Land that were letting me know what was important to the building -- its overall shape, the direction it faces and what was in the interior," he said.

He also wanted the buildings to be rugged and easy to build by the youth group.

"One of the biggest challenges was to design something that could be built by unskilled labor," he said.

George created the design and then handed it over to a company that makes kits for hogans. The company made the framing for the custom structures "that can be put together like Tinker Toys," he said.

The hogans may be replicated at other sites on the Navajo Nation. One might, for instance, be used as a health clinic.

Pierce said the church is not looking to convert the Navajos to the Episcopal church. He said the goal is for the church and Navajo people to work together to address practical needs and improve living conditions.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of projects that need to be done to restore the spirit of the Navajo people," he said.

David Bailey, Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Navajo Land, said building a hogan, rather than a buying another trailer, is a sign of respect for the Navajo people.

"Having that hogan says to them this is who we are. It expresses their culture," he said.

Plummer said one of her first goals when she moves into her new home will be to reach out to elders in the community to learn what their needs are. She said many Navajo have moved back on to the reservation in recent years, and her new home will be closer to them than is her current trailer on the church mission site.

The hogan also will be special for her because it will stand on land by the San Juan River that has been in her family for generations.

"I will have my own home and it will be on my grandfather's land," she said.

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